

## Arlington drug-court program has changed attitudes, inside and out of courtroom

by SCOTT McCAFFREY, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, March 27, 2015 12:00 pm



Michael Mullins, who on March 26, 2015, graduated from the Arlington Circuit Court's drug-court program, is flanked by Circuit Court Judge Louise DiMatteo and Dana Mertz, administrator of the program.

It took him 494 days to complete Arlington's drug-court program, but for Michael Mullins, the time may have been a game-changer.

“This is a new beginning – I’m grateful, I’m thankful. My whole life has turned around,” Mullins, 63, said during a March 26 ceremony at the Arlington County Justice Center.

And some ceremony: Those in attendance included elected officials, the county manager, sheriff, commonwealth’s attorney, clerk of the Circuit Court, acting police chief, members of the judiciary, as well as other participants in the diversionary program – one that Arlington leaders embraced somewhat reluctantly, but have grown to support.

The concept is similar to drug courts across the nation: Target those convicted of drug offenses and use a multidisciplinary effort to keep them out of jail and on a path toward lifelong sobriety and responsibility.

For years, some pressed Arlington officials to take the plunge. Yet even when the Virginia Supreme Court cleared the way, Arlington officials remained unconvinced of its merits.

“There was real resistance – I was among the people who was a doubter,” acknowledged Commonwealth’s Attorney Theo Stamos.

Stamos, first elected in 2011, agreed to try things out and assigned one of her senior deputies – Evie Eastwood – to see if the effort would bear fruit.

“We slowly came around to accept it as a wonderful and powerful tool,” Stamos said. “It is growing, and that is wonderful to see.”

County Manager Barbara Donnellan also is on board. She called the initiative a case of “compassionate leadership,” and has recommended continuing funding after a pilot period.

“The participants have made so much change in their lives,” said Dana Mertz, coordinator of the drug-court program.

Mertz credited Circuit Court Judge Louise DiMatteo, who presides over the program, for much of the success.

“She balances accountability with compassion,” Mertz said, calling DiMatteo a “fearless leader.”

DiMatteo, a former assistant county attorney who was elevated to the bench in 2012, oversees the initiative with an upbeat personality that resonates positivity and even jocularity, but isn’t afraid to be hard-nosed when the occasion calls for it.

“I’m not your mom, but I’m just trying to make sure you get everything done – getting yourself organized, getting your plan together,” she told one of the drug-court participants during a regular session that preceded the graduation ceremony.

As Mullins’ 16-month journey through the program’s four stages can attest, it is neither a quick nor easy endeavor. During that period, he was drug-screened about 150 times, made 30-some

court appearances, attended outpatient support groups, maintained his employment, came up with the funds to pay restitution and engaged in moral-recognition therapy.

Mullins has “worked hard – really hard,” DiMatteo said.

“He’s been pushed, he’s been prodded, he’s been cajoled,” she said, before speaking directly to him.

“Thank you for having an open mind. Thank you for letting us help you. You are a very different person. It’s quite inspiring to me,” DiMatteo said.

Mullins had been in and out of the criminal-justice system since age 27. He acknowledges having been resistant to the rules and requirements of the drug-court program, but eventually became a convert, and has helped spread the word in jail and the broader community.

“I take care of my responsibilities,” he said. “I’m doing the things I should have done a long time ago.”

As for his past actions? “I wish I could change them. I can’t. But I can move forward,” Mullins said.

As part of the ceremony, he received a certificate and two special bonuses: the dismissal of the last charges against him and the end of his probation. Make that three bonuses: He also garnered a hug from DiMatteo.

The drug-court initiative draws on resources of the offices of commonwealth’s attorney and public defender, as well as sheriff’s office, police department and Department of Human Services.

Having a graduation ceremony is important not only for those leaving the program, but those in all its stages, officials said.

“It is showing all the people next to them there is an end,” Mertz said, so they “continue to work hard each day.”

“There’s no day off when it comes to recovery,” she said.